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ASIA / THE COMPLETE ECOLOGY & WILDLIFE QUARTERLY

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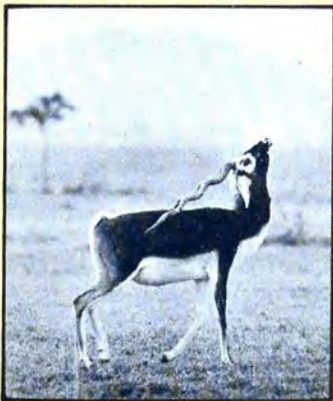
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LEAVES FROM A WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER'S DIARY

SUNLIGHT & SHADOWS

Text & photographs by M.Y. GHORPADE

“Ancient Indian philosophy arose and was nurtured in forest hermitages. It recognised that humans coexist with other beings. Modern science has rediscovered how vital forests are for the continued health of civilization. Many people ask if animals are to be preserved at the cost of human beings. Obviously not. What environmentalists and conservationists are trying to point out is that for our own mental and physical well-being, perhaps even for our survival, we need a balanced environment. Forests are the lungs of a country and, to flourish, forests need animals and birds. That is why wildlife must live. The destruction of flora and fauna has adversely affected forests and even fields and crops.

Human beings persist in upsetting the balance of natural forces. But somehow so far nature had managed to hold its own. Now, the extent of the damage and the speed with which deforestation on the one hand and pollution on the other are growing, are seriously weakening Mother Earth's enormous capacity for renewal.

What a marvel is the human brain. Each of its inventions seems to be more wonderful than the one before. Yet there is a seed of discontent within and a search for something different, something deeper within oneself. In earlier ages that search had drawn people to jungles and mountains in an attempt to think and see more clearly. Now we are imprisoned in jungles of concrete and steel and have lost our links with nature.”

These are not the words of a professional naturalist, but those of the Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, extracted from her sensitive foreword to M.Y. Ghorpade's book *“Sunlight and Shadows.”*

Those who cannot create the opportunities to visit forests must rely on naturalist-photographers to bring the jungle into their homes. This the author does admirably well through his book, from which the following photographs have been reproduced. In an age of colour the author has remained steadfastly loyal to the medium he has loved for so many years—black and white photography. And, as can be judged from the following pages, his results more than justify his decision to restrict himself thus. While glancing casually at visuals such as these, it is possible for one to be left with the impression that wildlife photography involves nothing more than a simple expedition into the jungle, the exposure of a few rolls of film, followed by a quick retreat to the dark-room. This, as anyone who has tried to photograph any form of natural life will confirm, is far from true. Often days or weeks are spent in trying to record just one image, such as the one of the great Indian horned owl feeding its young. Ghorpade's effort is not just a work of art it is an exercise in patience and a labour of love.

















Captions for Sunlight & Shadows's photographs

The Tigers

The tiger cub was inexperienced in the art of making a swift kill. It was still in the process of learning and took some time to kill the deer. The tigress was watching but did not interfere or assist the cub. The tiger cub had tasted blood and was celebrating the event by playing with the carcass in an animated and childish manner. The tigress decided that it was time to take over from the cub. She picked up the fresh kill with great ease and elegance, and walked confidently across the dry river-bed, with the deer dangling from her firm experienced mouth. The other tiger had already got into the shallow water pool and was watching the tigress come with eager anticipation. This was our chance of getting a unique photograph. It all happened so fast that I had no time to change lenses. I had the 150 mm lens but fortunately Ajai had the Hassleblad with the 250 mm lens. He made no mistake. He clicked at the right moment when both the tigress with the dangling deer and the other tiger were framed in a perfect setting. Location: Kanha National Park.

The Owls

The Indian Great horned owl was photographed by me in the rocky outskirts of Bannergatta near Bangalore.

I fastened my Hasselblad camera (with a 150 mm Sonnar lens) to a wooden pole about 10 feet from the outer edge of the open granite chamber in which the three young owls were huddled together; two small electronic flash units were carefully positioned, one a little to one side and the other above the camera, to lighten the shadows and get some modulation. To minimize the risk of disturbing the bird, I planned to perch on a tree about 20 metres away and operate the camera shutter with the help of a remote-release mechanism. I sat inside a leafy machan or camouflaged platform which had been hurriedly put up on a tree opposite the owl's nest. My son Ajai, who is also very keen on wildlife photography, managed to squeeze into the narrow tree-hide with me. From here we had a clear view of the nest. At about 7 p.m. we could hear the owl hooting and screeching. After that there was silence and nothing happened for quite some time. Then all of a sudden the owl landed on the rocky ledge without a sound. Ajai flashed the battery-operated torch and I pressed the button of the remote-release shutter as soon as I thought the owl had turned its head towards us. It worked.

The Lion Cub

A lioness and her cubs were in a calm and playful mood. The cubs would pretend to stroll away, only to return quickly to the mother, and every time they came back it was an excuse to show and receive affection. The mother kept a silent watch without actively participating in all this horseplay. One of the cubs suddenly thought of climbing up a tree,

peeping down from one of its low branches and then jumping down cautiously with its head down, as if it had performed a great acrobatic feat. I was later told that this was quite a rare sight and few had succeeded in photographing a Gir lion climbing up and down a tree.

The Elephant

I was able to photograph this tusker playfully picking up fine dust and allowing it to slip through smoothly on either side of the tip of his slightly coiled trunk; when I clicked, the elephant had lifted his right foot and there was a mischievous glint in his eye.

The Sarus Cranes

Suddenly the sarus pair indulged in a beautiful greeting display, their heads pointing to the heavens, beaks partly open and eyelids fluttering in a spontaneous expression of joy and conjugal bliss. They were happy to be happy. Fortunately I was ready and with my Hasselblad EL I managed to click three times in quick succession before the superb display was over. Location: Bharatpur.

The Blackbuck

An exclusively Indian antelope, the male blackbuck's spiral horns and glistening black and white coat present a dramatic visual impact.

The Painted Storks.

At Bharatpur, it is a common sight to see a dozen or more nests on a single tree standing in water. The birds are in the habit of producing a clattering sound with their powerful mandibles while shaking their heads from side to side. They protect their young from the scorching sun by spreading their wings like an umbrella, and are often seen standing motionless, sometimes on one leg, meditating. This is the bird I have photographed most in this sanctuary. The bird about to alight on its nest makes a beautiful picture, provided the light, angle and the timing of the shot has been correct. The photograph of the painted stork showing full wing-spread was taken with the Hasselblad (250 mm Sonnar) at 1/500 of a second.

The Rhinos

While returning to camp, we surprised two rhinos, mother and well-grown calf, in a small clearing surrounded by tall grass. This was not on the beaten track and the rhinos had not expected to be caught napping. Their first reaction was to stand close to each other facing my elephant. Fortunately the sun was not completely hidden by the clouds and the mynahs suddenly decided to keep the rhinos company. After their initial surprise the two rhinos relaxed and stood a little apart, but the mynahs continued to sit on their backs looking at each other. The slanting light and the mynahs made this picture. Location: Kaziranga.

Sunlight and Shadows, published by B.I. Publications, is available in India @ Rs. 175/-